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Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

SALT Sabotage

Testimony secretly given to the House Intelligence Committee by Gen. Richard Ellis that the Soviet Union has a "good" SALT treaty compliance record helps sabotage President Reagan's five-year battle for a new arms control policy.

As the administration's man on the U.S.-Soviet compliance commission, former Strategic Air Commander Ellis is presumably well-qualified on Soviet treaty performance, or nonperformance. Yet his Nov. 20 testimony seems a direct contradiction of charges Reagan himself has often made publicly over the last two years about Soviet violations.

Ellis' testimony helps explain strong hints of SALT treaty continuity that Secretary of State George Shultz has given U.S. NATO allies. Shultz has virtually assured them the president will continue to adhere to basic SALT II provisions after Dec. 31, the date the treaty would have expired had it ever been ratified. SALT II, once stigmatized by Reagan as "fatally flawed," is becoming Reagan's tar baby: the harder he attacks it, the faster he is stuck.

Ellis' testimony angered Pentagon officials at the command level. But its implication—that the United States should stick with the treaty despite Soviet misconduct—fits a despondent new mood imposed on the three services by unprecedented spending cuts that were approved by Reagan himself when he signed the Gramm-Rudman budget-balancing legislation last week.

Sticking to SALT II means that by late spring the Navy will probably be compelled to cut up two more of its Poseidon submarines to make way for one more Trident missile-firing sub destined to enter sea trials by then. Navy Secretary John Lehman has quietly passed word that given the extraordinary spending cuts of Gramm-Rudman, he would prefer to retire the aging Poseidons and use the money saved for more urgent purposes.

The same mood threatens to conflict with a series of sensible proposals soon to come to the president's desk from Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. Weinberger and his top SALT adviser, Assistant Secretary Richard Perle, have completed major work on recommendations for "proportionate" U.S. responses to Soviet violations, leaving SALT II theoretically intact while the U.S. attempts to compensate for Soviet violations.

One of these is likely to be a proposal for

costly improvement of "pen-aids," shorthand for a whole series of devices to give U.S. warheads a better chance to penetrate Soviet defenses. But pen-aids are expensive; the Air Force and the Navy, caretakers of the strategic missile forces, would not be likely to sacrifice pilot flying hours or ship steaming days, considered the heart and core of readiness, for penetration aids that may or may not work.

Another "proportionate" U.S. response under consideration is encryption of testing data, a Soviet violation that has become routine. But the United States knows that Moscow already has good intelligence on American strategic weapons, much of it available through unclassified sources. Moreover, the United States has no new weapons to test today.

The president will be informed early next year by the arms control agency that there were no "overall" improvements in Soviet treaty compliance during 1985 and some evidence of cheating in new areas not noticed before. That would counsel no easing of any kind in the president's determination not to let Soviet noncompliance off scot-free.

But SALT II may have claimed Reagan as its victim beyond recall. The one new political ingredient—Adm. John Poindexter, who succeeded Robert McFarlane as Reagan's national security adviser—is regarded as considerably more hard-line on some issues than his predecessor. The president's tough anti-Sandinista radio address last Saturday might never have passed muster with McFarlane.

But Poindexter was far removed from SALT matters and maneuvers during McFarlane's ascendancy. It would take formidable talent for him to turn back the momentum of bureaucratic pressure now aimed at forcing the president to abide by SALT II.

The implications for Ronald Reagan as chief architect of his own second-term policies are profound. Instead of mustering the political strength of his own judgment and the prolific record of Soviet cheating and honorably ending American compliance with a treaty that had never been ratified, he seems compliantly to the grip of forces operating against his own interests.

What makes that doubly wounding for him is that the Dec. 31 treaty expiration date was set by President Carter. If Reagan extends SALT II beyond that, he can no longer pass it off as Jimmy Carter's. It then becomes Ronald Reagan's tar baby.

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